Autumn Tree of Pleasure – Japan/Archana Hebbar Colquhoun

- **The Tree has a Symbolism that is Timeless and Universal in its Origins. The Expressions are limitless and found in all cultures and religions.**

The Bhagawad Gita (15.1)

Lord Krishna describes the divine Ashvattha tree, as that whose roots grow upwards and the branches of which extend downwards; its leaves are the sacred knowledge of the Vedas; the knower of this tree has attained the knowledge of the Vedas.

Carl Gustav Jung

"No tree, it is said, can grow to heaven unless its roots reach down to hell."

The above two quotes, to me, point to the limitless ways in which the symbolism of a tree can be expressed.

I would like to place my painting "Autumn Tree of Pleasure" within the context of the extensive symbolism that the Tree has generated in our imagination.

In this essay, I would like to talk about the visual devices I used in the painting of the autumn tree to depict time, movement, **and the part that memory plays in the creation of an artwork.** I painted the 'autumn tree' before I moved back to India, at the turn of the century.

- **Materials used in the painting**

The autumn tree is painted on an imperial size card sheet with charcoal, pastels, acrylic paints, and a bit of turmeric for the yellow – or is the yellow pigment not turmeric?

The quality and range of paper types, including the sizes and formats of cut and rolled paper that I encountered in Japan filled me with such joy and amazement that I switched from sculpture and installation art to painting, for a time.

- **The Tree and the Painting**

In the painting, **I wanted to show** – most of all – **the movement of falling leaves**.

Fall is another name for **autumn**.

A tree shedding its autumnal leaves*, the shade of* ***kumkum*** *red – deep, rich, dense, and tactile –* ***is an annual spectacle of nature*** *that is witnessed only in some parts of the world, which have a temperate climate.*

- **My relationship with the tree**

Coming from the tropics i.e. southern India, I found **the concept of the four seasons** not just novel but in some respects alien.

After the first few years of living in Japan, I began to form my own, personal relationship with each of the **four seasons** that came and went in a regular cycle, without exception, every year.

Summer is perhaps the least favourite season for most people in Japan and it was the same for me.

Of the other three seasons – the soft, gentle **spring**, preceded by a cold, crisp, snowy **winter**, and the third the **autumn** with the grandeur of its colours and dazzling hues – **is my most inspirational.**

- **Picking a singular iconic image of a tree and blotting out the surrounding panoramic stretch**

The subject of the painting, **The Autumn Tree of Pleasure**, which I painted after having lived through several Japanese autumns, harked back to an image (of a painting of an autumn tree) that was already present in my mind as a vivid and abiding memory, for more than a decade, before I visited Japan and made the country my second home.

I am referring here to the well-known Indian miniature painting titled "**Squirrels in a Chinar Tree**" by the master painter **Abu'l-Hasan** (see NOTE below) who worked in the Mughal emperor, Jahangir's atelier in the seventeenth century. The Chinar tree grows in the valleys of Kashmir and is considered to be a symbol of Kashmir's rich, cultural and environmental heritage.

I was introduced to this painting in my art history classes in Baroda. The **shape of the leaves** of the Chinar tree, the **flame-red hue** of many of them (alongside the green leaves) depicted in the Mughal miniature painting, I found puzzling and fascinating. This was a tree in the early stages of an autumnal metamorphosis. Such a tree, where leaves seemed to take the place of flowers because of their distinctive colours, I had never seen in southern India.

[**NOTE**: *The work is sometimes attributed to the artist Mansur or considered to be a collaborative work by the two artists. In any case, works of art not only in India but also in Europe were the result of collective work by trainee artists and artisans who worked under the auspices of a single master to whom then the work of art would be attributed. The painting is in the collection of a museum outside India as are a large number of other masterpieces of Indian art. A simple Internet search will disclose all necessary information on the painting. Due to copyright restrictions I have not included an image of the painting, which is titled in most cases "**Squirrels in a Plane Tree**."*]

- **The Chinar tree and my painting**

The **Chinar tree** belongs to the family of **Plane trees** and resembles the **Japanese maple tree**. It is considered to be an endangered species going by the rapidly decreasing numbers of the tree in Kashmir. One of the features of the **Chinar tree** is its **deep and extensive root growth** that covers a ground area

larger than the spread of its tree top. The bifurcation of the tree trunk into roots is visible just above the ground level where the tree rises in its magnificence.

The roots of a **Chinar tree** need to breathe and be able to draw nutrients and generous amounts of water from the surrounding soil for its survival, healthy growth, and longevity. When road construction and building works are carried out close to and right above the ground area where the roots of the Chinar tree lie **the death of the tree from suffocation and starvation soon follows**.

- **A Pictorial Analysis of the painting "An Autumn Tree of Pleasure" through Q & A**

Q1. What sort of a tree is the ***Autumn Tree of Pleasure***, is it a Chinar tree?

A1. The tree in the painting is a generic, deciduous tree that sheds its leaves in the **autumn** but before it starts to bare its branches, a performance takes place whereby the **green leaves turn** into a **golden yellow followed by a deep orange, and/or finally a blood-red hue**.

Q2. How did this painting come about?

A2. I can best answer the question in the form of a **sequence diagram** using words and symbols as follows:

a ***memory*** **+** a ***life experience*** **→** a **memory retrieval through synchronic activation** within the brain **↔** a ***motivation to create*** = the ***final art work***

Note: It is a mystery as to why only certain memories and or life experiences lead to the production of an artwork, especially when the artwork is purely self-motivated and is not a work that is commissioned by a patron.

Q3. How is **movement** depicted in the **painting**? What **pictorial devices** do you employ to **show movement** in a **static, two-dimensional representation** of an image?

A3. The following **four elements** are used to depict movement in the painting.

- Wind
- Shifting axis in the composition
- Suggestion of Time through placement of pictorial elements on the picture surface
- Change in pigmentation

1**. Wind creates movement** which in turn disturbs the leaves, dislodging them from the branches, and speeds up the process of the falling of the leaves.

2**. Diagonal lines** in a composition can also be used to **show movement**. In the painting the branches of the tree are drawn in sweeping, rightward curves the arcs pointing downwards.

3. **Time represents movement**. The passing of time is inferred from the position of the leaves painted as individual elements in a random pattern at varying levels within the painting, which shows the descent of the leaves to the ground at different times.

4. **Change in pigment** can also indicate the passing of time. The leaves on the ground are painted dark red the colour of dried blood and it can be understood that the leaves have been on the ground for some time, in contrast to the brighter red of the leaves that are shown airborne.

The painting, *Autumn Tree of Pleasure,* to me represents the tragic history of Kashmir. The region was considered a paradise on earth, depicted as such in countless paintings and in the romantic song sequences of Indian movies till just a few decades ago.

As a visual artist, *I have so far rarely repeated an artistic idea or a form, unless I am in the process of exploring the various facets and permutational possibilities of the idea.* Use of different materials comes into play when I want to express an idea through different media – paintings, sculptures, art installations etc.

A variation on the autumn tree is a painting which I made

using only the red viscous liquid that comes in a tiny tube with a dipper for painting a ***bindi*** – a red dot or an elongated line on the forehead, which is commonly used in India by women as a chief element of facial makeup.

I sometimes refer to the painting as **A Red Tree**, which I painted very soon after painting **The Autumn Tree of Pleasure**.

Photo Credit: **Arun Visweswaran**